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ABSTRACT

Higher education in America today is increasingly the education of adults. Although full-time students are, when they start college, usually 18 years old and financially dependent, the term student also covers very large numbers of persons who have dropped out and reentered, who are registered for courses but not degrees, who take refresher work in teaching and other professions, who enroll in correspondence and television courses, and who are served by higher education in a host of other ways. Even today, then, most students in many institutions are over the age of legal majority and carry full adult responsibilities. These characteristics require that they be given special educational consideration. This document presents an identification of central questions related to the education of adults and offers recommendations as to how to deal with the special problems that may arise. (Author/HS)

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October 25, 1972

Higher Education and the Adult Student

To serve the nation and its people in the decades ahead, colleges and universities and those who support them are setting aside three traditional assumptions that in the past have controlled much of what they have done:

- The assumption that college students are all young and financially dependent.
- The assumption that there is a fundamental difference between what is learned in residence and what is learned in extension courses or independently.
- The assumption that the ideal college serves an essentially middle class clientele and has no important responsibilities to disadvantaged urban and rural populations.

Institutions modifying their programs to serve adults and rural and urban students and to recognize nonresident accomplishments have had—with their sponsors—to resolve a number of social, academic, financial, and governmental issues.

To encourage the widespread and rapid development of such programs, the Committee on Higher Adult Education of the American Council on Education has prepared an analysis of twelve significant issues and a set of recommendations directed to college administrators and faculty and to those outside the institutions whose decisions affect public and private support.

The recommendations deal with the nature of the commitment an institution must make if it is to serve adult students, changes in institutional structures, the curriculum, the use of community resources and new technology, the use of credits and degrees, issues in accreditation and licensing policies, the maintenance of quality, the preparation of faculty and administrators, the filling of gaps in research, the costs, and the role of adult education organizations.

The Committee's statement, "Higher Education and the Adult Student," was endorsed by the Council's Commission on Academic Affairs, September 11, 1972, and Board of Directors, October 3, 1972.

HE003564

HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE ADULT STUDENT

Statement prepared by the Committee on Higher Adult Education and endorsed by the Commission on Academic Affairs and the Board of Directors, American Council on Education.

Higher education in America today is increasingly the education of adults. Although *full-time* students are, when they start college, usually 18 years old and financially dependent, the term *student* also covers very large numbers of persons who have dropped out and reentered, who are registered for courses but not degrees, who take refresher work in teaching and other professions, who enroll in correspondence and television courses, and who are served by higher education in a host of other ways. Even today, then, most students in many institutions are over the age of legal majority and carry full adult responsibilities. These characteristics require that they be given special educational consideration.

The Committee on Higher Adult Education of the American Council on Education believes that the absolute numbers of students carrying adult responsibilities will increase substantially in the next decade and that their proportion among all students will be greater than it is today. Higher education must respond to this shift in the characteristics of the student population.

In December, 1971, the Committee prepared and sent to a number of national educational planning bodies a brief statement, "Twelve Issues in Nontraditional Study," which identified central questions related to the education of adults. The Committee now offers its own recommendations with the following considerations in mind:

- Higher adult education, once very limited in scope and thus on most campuses the province of small administrative units with small resources, now warrants concerted attention at the highest administrative and faculty levels throughout the institution.
- Decisions to improve, enlarge, or otherwise modify an institution's efforts for adult students must include decisions to provide resources and structures commensurate with the job to be done.
- The recommendations of the Committee will be valuable only to the extent that the people to whom they are addressed are specified and that a useful course of action is suggested in them. Thus they focus directly on the education of adults and, as far as possible, put the burden of action on persons and groups already committed to, and active in, the field. Because adult students have begun to participate in every aspect of many colleges' programs, however, several of the recommendations are perforce directed to leaders in colleges and universities, university systems, and various state, regional, and national agencies.

1. Commitment

Just as the traditions and resources of colleges and universities vary, so will their efforts in adult education all the way from offering conventional opportunities for earning credits and degrees to designing special programs that meet the objectives of specific categories of adult students. Whatever the emphasis, however, colleges and universities must (either separately or collectively) find ways to meet their commitments to adult students.

The Committee recommends:

1.1: That colleges and universities include, as a formal element in all planning, a policy of giving adequate and independent attention to the needs of their adult and of their young students, present and projected.

1.2: That colleges and universities, having assessed their commitment to adult students, express this commitment clearly both in the stated aims and in the actual operations of their institutions.

1.3: That colleges and universities, whatever their emphasis in adult education, devise programs—and provide sufficient resources for these programs—to make the achievement of their aims possible.

1.4: That colleges, universities, and university systems establish cooperative arrangements so that the educational resources available to adult students are increased and duplication is reduced.

2. Structure

Unmodified, the traditional college and university structures designed for young full-time students have not worked well for adult students. The type of structure best suited to the education of adults will vary according to the setting and to the numbers and needs of the students to be served. Whether new or traditional, the structure will be ineffective unless it has authority and resources commensurate with its responsibilities.

The Committee recommends:

2.1: That colleges, universities, and university systems survey their present student clientele, counting all students in continuing education, extension, part-time study, credit and noncredit courses, and off-campus activities; that they project these data for a period of ten years; and that they disseminate the resulting information to the institutional community, the surrounding community, alumni groups, public bodies, and private sponsors.

2.2: That each institution and system formally review its academic and administrative organization as it relates to present and prospective adult students; modify the structure wherever it does not adequately serve student needs; and assign responsibility and the necessary authority and resources to its administrators.

2.3: That state, regional, and national agencies which support higher education encourage institutions to experiment with programs for adult students by advocating or providing adequate funds for this purpose.

3. **Curriculum**

A comprehensive program of postsecondary education must be more than just an extension to more people of traditional degree-credit programs designed for the young and offered by conventional departments. On the other hand, the establishment of new programs for which there is no clientele is an activity which has nothing to commend it. Therefore, program planning should start by identifying the real needs and capacities of real students, including their requirements as to the time and place of learning, their receptivity to various methods of learning, and the extent of their experience. Substantial work has already been done on unconventional forms of instruction applicable to adults, and more attention should be paid to it.

The Committee recommends:

3.1: That higher adult educators and their associations advocate the primacy of student interests and needs in the planning of curricula.

3.2: That higher adult educators and their associations advocate, and help to establish, mechanisms for educational guidance which would direct the adult student to educational opportunities in postsecondary institutions, and other regional and community resources.

3.3: That higher adult educators encourage their institutions to be more flexible with respect to curricula, to the scheduling and location of classes, and to instructional methods in order to meet a variety of adult student objectives.

3.4: That higher adult education associations take steps to inform curricular planners about successful experiments in designing and conducting programs which meet the individual needs and interests of adult students.

4. **Educational Resources**

Because of this nation's historical commitment to postsecondary education and training, it has resources unmatched by any other country: e.g., collegiate institutions, continuing education and extension programs, professional and industrial refresher courses, schools for training in virtually every occupation and avocation, libraries and museums that serve as repositories for information, instruction, and example in every phase of life. To benefit from this rich array of resources usually available even at the local level, the potential student often needs information that he does not now have.

The Committee recommends:

4.1: That higher adult educators take the lead in designing and establishing—in colleges, communities, and regions (or whichever are most appropriate)—cooperative activities which, by pooling information, offering guidance, and planning programs, will give adult students a means of access to educational resources.

4.2: That higher adult educators, through their institutions and the cooperative activities called for above, plan and conduct programs to inform the people of the community about available educational opportunities and to provide assistance to those who wish to develop a course of study for themselves.

4.3: That higher adult educators devise and conduct experimental programs which will make it easier for students to move among institutions and which will make the best possible educational use of appropriate work experience and combinations of various instructional methods.

5. **Technology**

Adult education has long been characterized by variety and flexibility: in using faculty, in dealing with a variety of cost models, and time schedules, and in designing programs on diverse topics. It should be similarly varied and flexible in taking advantage of technological developments. The basic posture should be one of deliberate experimentation within a framework of wise research and development.

The Committee recommends:

5.1: That leaders in higher adult education move deliberately in the imaginative development of technology as a growing element in educational programs.

5.2: That higher adult educators initiate working relationships between themselves and technological specialists to plan educational programs.

5.3: That adult educators, through their associations, lead in developing guidelines for the preparation of technology-based instructional materials, whether produced by educational institutions or by industry.

6. **Credit and Degrees**

Because of this nation's long history of relying on credit-bearing programs of study for the purpose of degree certification, and because of the public's general acceptance of higher education's certification function, it is understandable that the expanding demand for education by nontraditional students will be met, in part, by extending the traditional degree-granting formats. But a new openness to alternative formats is now evident among both traditional and nontraditional students. Higher adult education must serve as the link between the two groups, as it has in the past.

The Committee recommends:

6.1: That higher adult educators and their associations stand as firm advocates of adult credit-free learning as well as credit programs and of an appropriate balance between both in the allocation of institutional resources.

6.2: That colleges and universities give young and adult students equal access to degrees and certification, providing different academic programs and modifying policies on admissions, advancement, transfer of credit, credit by examination, and residency requirements, as necessary.

7. **Accreditation and Licensure**

Accreditation and licensure are necessary to protect the public against fraudulent institutions and quack practitioners. In a time of postsecondary expansion and experimentation, such protections must be maintained. Care should be taken, however,

lest a too strict adherence to accrediting and licensing conventions delay or defeat the development of suitable alternative means of providing high-quality education and of producing competent practitioners.

The Committee recommends:

7.1: That colleges and universities which are developing nontraditional programs for adults involve appropriate accrediting and licensing bodies during planning and initial execution.

7.2: That, as part of their periodic evaluations of institutions and specialized programs, regional and specialized accrediting agencies review continuing and adult education activities.

7.3: That higher adult education associations take definite steps to explain to representatives of accrediting and licensing agencies the nature of the various forms of higher adult education—old and new—and to suggest appropriate measures for evaluating the effectiveness of those that depart widely from tradition.

8. Quality

The increasing diversity in American postsecondary education—in its aims, methods, and clientele—carries with it a constant need to alter or modify standards of quality. Traditional standards, established for programs with limited aims and a homogeneous student body, are not appropriate for programs with different aims and different students.

The Committee recommends:

8.1: That adult educational leaders and their associations recommend procedures for evaluating the results of existing models of higher adult education and of new models as they are planned. Particular attention should be given to how well each model effects desired changes in students.

8.2: That professional associations such as the Modern Language Association and the American Chemical Society take action to study the characteristics and academic needs of an increasingly diverse student clientele, with particular attention to adults, part-time students, and recurrent or stop-out students, and with a view toward recommending programmatic modifications to ensure quality in the disciplinary specialties.

8.3: That higher education associations join with accrediting agencies in developing new techniques for evaluating the quality of nontraditional programs.

9. Faculty and Administrators

Because the characteristics, motivations, aspirations, and problems of adult students differ from those of younger and less experienced students, higher adult education requires specialized knowledge and experience if it is to be successful. Adult students, bringing extensive personal experience to bear on their studies of theory and procedure, often learn best through problem solving. Thus, varied groups of faculty members and administrators are necessary to conduct effective programs of adult education. The talents for teaching and administering such programs may be found in the traditional faculties and in the community, as well as among those prepared especially for these tasks by formal education and in-service training and experience.

The Committee recommends:

9.1: That each college and university engage the faculties of all appropriate academic divisions in carrying out its commitment to the continuing education of adults.

9.2: That the qualification and performance standards and the rewards for faculty engaged in adult education be commensurate with those for faculty in other academic programs.

9.3: That colleges and universities offering adult education courses sponsor special in-service programs for faculty, administrators, and staff; these programs should give training in such matters as the assessment of adult educational needs, curriculum, adult learning, counseling, and financial aid.

9.4: That adult education organizations, in conjunction with relevant national commissions dealing with nontraditional educational models, develop guidelines for identifying, selecting, and rewarding persons in college communities who may be available as adjunct faculty members for adult education programs.

10. Research

Higher adult education is only beginning to understand its present accomplishments and the scope of its future role. As nontraditional opportunities for postsecondary education multiply, questions about the learning process, quality of programs, costs, and a variety of other matters will become increasingly pressing. To answer them will require the disciplined acquisition and codification of research findings.

The Committee recommends:

10.1: That adult education leaders, through their associations, establish mechanisms to improve the evaluation of the great variety of programs conducted under the rubric of adult education.

10.2: That adult education associations initiate discussions with officials of the Higher Education General Information Survey (HEGIS) to improve the nature, scope, and timing of the collection of national data concerning adult students.

10.3: That adult education associations cooperate to establish guidelines for the collection of local and regional data concerning both enrolled and potential adult students.

10.4: That adult education associations select and help to develop a number of data collection and distribution centers for special aspects of the field, such as the assessment of adult educational needs, the training of teachers, the preparation of teaching materials, the evaluation of adult learning, and financing.

10.5: That administrators of such conference facilities as the Kellogg Centers—together with their clients and adult educators—study conference procedures and processes with a view to the further development and wider use of those proved most effective.

10.6: That research workers undertake basic studies of the nature and processes of adult education, seeking both theoretical knowledge which will explain relationships and practical knowledge which will aid in solving problems.

10.7: That adult education professors or other experts in collaboration with faculty colleagues from other disciplines, encourage the use of adult education programs as an experimental setting for testing general hypotheses in the social sciences (e.g., small-group behavior).

11. **Costs**

In recent years, funds for special programs and financial aid for some categories of disadvantaged students have increased substantially. Nonetheless, now as in the past, financial support continues to favor conventional programs and conventional students at the postsecondary level. Therefore, it becomes necessary to reexamine the assumptions that the person who has at some point dropped out and thereby deviated from the usual pattern (direct from high school to college, direct from college to graduate school) must thereafter pay the full costs of his education if he is to reenter, that education for adults must be self-supporting, and that scholarships and fellowships should be reserved for full-time students. These assumptions affect not only financial aid to students but also administrative support for adult programs and the salaries of faculty engaged in such programs.

The Committee recommends:

11.1: That the American Council on Education establish a committee to devise and promulgate appropriate ways of funding the education of the nation's adults; this committee should take into account the roles of students and of Federal, state, and private sponsors, and the forthcoming recommendations of national commissions currently considering the matter.

11.2: That colleges and universities examine their present practices and, where necessary, take steps to make subsidies equitable for all students: full-time and part-time, younger and older, male and female.

11.3: That leaders of higher adult education initiate discussions with representatives of groups supporting higher education—alumni, corporations, legislators, national and state executives, private and foundation donors—to encourage their providing new scholarship and student aid funds.

12. **Adult Education Organizations**

Adult education organizations, like other organizations of postsecondary educational institutions or programs, turn two ways: toward their members, to assist them in carrying out their unique roles as traditionally defined; and toward institutions and other segments of the postsecondary educational community. Cooperation is relatively easy when roles are well defined and funds are reasonably abundant. But as the nation moves toward greatly expanded and altered postsecondary opportunities, changes will be required in higher adult education programs and in the relationships between these and the rest of the postsecondary effort.

The Committee recommends:

12.1: That existing adult education associations develop a strong national body to represent them in the postsecondary educational community and to join with that community in providing information and advice to extraeducational agencies and the public.

12.2: That academic institutions and organizations engaged directly in the field of higher adult education contribute to the financial support of this national body through appropriate assessments.

12.3: That the several adult education associations develop a mechanism for regular and effective communication with general associations such as the American Council on Education and with sponsors of adult education outside the conventional system of schools, colleges, and universities, such as industry, and professional, civic, and religious organizations.

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